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ABSTRACT

The design and implementation of a broad-based intervention program for students at risk of school failure are described, and implications are drawn for efforts to improve the education of at risk children. The Learning City Program uses state-of-the-art research to create a facilitating environment in which the continuous development of children and youth is at the center of economic and community revitalization efforts that will be sustainable over time. The delivery system that supports the implementation of the Learning City Program includes these key components: (1) a site-specific plan that takes the school's needs into account; (2) a schoolwide organizational structure that supports a teaming process for regular and specialist teachers; (3) a data-based staff development program for ongoing training and technical assistance; (4) an instructional-learning management system that focuses on student self-responsibility; (5) an integrated assessment-instruction process; (6) a family and community involvement plan; and (7) a school-linked comprehensive health and human services delivery program. The delivery framework of the Learning City Program mandates a coherent and coordinated approach with rooted connections with the family and community in the service of students. (Contains five references.) (SLD)

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Fostering Resilience Among Children At Risk of Educational Failure

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The research reported herein is supported in part by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) of the U.S. Department of Education through a grant to the National Center on Education in the Inner Cities (CEIC) at the Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education (CRHDE). The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position of the supporting agencies, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

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As Census data from the 1990s showed the United States leading the industrialized world in terms of children living in poverty, the nation's attention was drawn to the plight of children and families in a variety of risk circumstances. Schools today, particularly those in high-poverty communities such as the inner cities and isolated rural communities, are faced with the challenge of serving increasingly diverse populations of students who live in circumstances that place them at risk of educational failure. The quality of life available to these students and their families is threatened by a perilous set of modern morbidities.

Central among these are inadequate learning and competence, compounded by low self-esteem, lack of employment opportunities, stressful life experiences, inadequate education, poor health care, and highly fragmented patterns of services. Disinvestment of all kinds—economic, professional, and social—is the pattern. The problem of widespread academic failure, which could cripple the next generation, tends to be overshadowed by this litany of troubles, placing schools at the center of interconnected social problems.

It seems logical to expect that schools in communities with a high concentration of children and youth living in some of the most adverse situations would serve as a place of refuge and hope for children. To an extent, some do; others valiantly try. But sadly, in the critical matter of basic learning, many schools fail to help their students achieve the high academic standards that are required for work and further learning—adding only greater risks and adversities to the life circumstances of their students. There is simply no justification for inaction in the face of such serious deterioration in the lives of so many of our children and youth.

But this is only half of the full picture. Despite difficult life circumstances, many children and youth manage to rise above the problems and mature into healthy, competent, and well-

educated adults. Children are remarkably resilient; they respond readily to caring adults and a supportive community. If only we can find the means to magnify the "positives" in the life of every child, we can rekindle hope for remaking inner-city education into a system that fosters resilience and educational success of all of the increasingly diverse student population in our city schools.

This concern for improving the prospects for educational success and life accomplishments of children and families in circumstances that place them at risk has sparked a program of field-based intervention research on fostering educational resilience among children and youth attending schools in inner-city communities.

The purpose of my presentation today is to discuss the design and implementation of a broad-based intervention program, known as the Learning City Program, and to draw implications from our findings for scaling-up efforts to improve our capacity for development and education of children who are in circumstances that place them at risk or educational failure.

A Call for Action

Nothing can be counted as progress in a community until its children and youth are well served and show healthy development and steady and sustaining advances in learning. When children and youth lack the care they need, when they see too little progress and promise in their own lives, and those of their families and neighbors, they lose the hope and motivation for school success. This is the sad story of many students in our nation's schools, especially in inner-city communities.

Schools must remain the primary focus of efforts to improve the capacity for education. For surely other efforts will come to naught if schools fail to offer powerful forms of instruction to ensure a high standard of academic outcomes for all students. However, significant learning also

occurs in environments outside the school and the conditions for learning both in school and out are established at home and in the communities. Thus, the search for answers to the fundamental question, "What conditions are required to achieve significant improvements in the learning of children and youth in this country?" must embrace families and all elements of the community. Solutions are sure to require insights drawn from many disciplines and professions, collaboration among a wide range of public and private institutions, and a broad-based commitment to improved learning and competence of all children and the adults who serve them—in short, *a Learning City*.

Basic Premises

Several premises were highly influential in the development and design of the Learning City Program. They are briefly discussed below.

- Recent advances in research and practical knowledge on what makes learning more productive, especially for students with special needs, provide clear directions on how to substantially improve conventional practice. Many research-based, innovative practices can be implemented in scaled-up efforts to improve the capacity of schools to more effectively respond to the diverse learning needs of students. However, current practice in schools falls far short of the state of the art. One reason for this gap is the lack of a systematic knowledge base on how to implement what is known to work in coherent ways in the service of students through an integrated system of delivery. The Learning City Program aims to address this lack.
- The Learning City is a facilitating environment in which the continuous development of children and youth is at the center of economic and community revitalization efforts that are sustainable over time. A basic design consideration of the Learning City is to cull from the

research base and the practical know-how to mobilize a full spectrum of school, family, and community resources to more effectively respond to the schooling needs of every student.

- Implementation of the Learning City requires systematic efforts and focused work performed on a scale never previously attempted. The challenge is to find ways to harness all of the resources, expertise, and energies in linking schools with all other learning environments to transcend single agency auspices—the best information and tools for program design, implementation, and evaluation need to be applied at grassroots levels.
- No single component or practice can account for these improvements. What seems crucial is the way in which successful practices are combined in an integrated system of delivery that considers the needs of the students and the site-specific strengths and constraints at the staff, resource support, policy, and administrative levels Poorly implemented versions of demonstrably successful practices are unlikely to achieve the same success. Furthermore, some practices that work well in some settings and with some students may not have the same effect in others. Nonetheless, the research base on what works provides a promising basis for formulating improvement programs that are both site-specific and strategic.
- Many innovative programs are being envisioned for implementation and a variety of programs are already in place and can be extended. Considering what is known and what is required to achieve improved capacity for serving all students in an inclusive system of service delivery, pervasive and systemic structural changes are necessary. Though difficult, these changes are important and untried opportunities for improvement that must be pursued.

A Framework for Planning and Program Delivery

Figure 1 is a schematic representation of an integrated framework for the design and implementation of the Learning City Program. The Learning City Program at a given site is reflective of the educational goals as operationalized through site-specific program design elements being implemented in the schools and connected with a wide range of learning opportunities in varied environments, including the home and the community. Although it is anticipated that the Learning City Program will vary across sites based on site-specific needs and capacities, the program elements shown in Figure 1 are illustrative of the core design elements that are generic to a Learning City.

A centerpiece of the Learning City Program, as shown in Figure 1, is the integrated framework for a collaborative process of uniting people and resources in initiating schoolwide restructuring efforts to ensure student success. At its most effective, the process strengthens the school's capacity to mobilize and redeploy community and school resources to support the implementation of a comprehensive, coordinated, inclusive approach to service delivery.

Thus, a major expected outcome of the implementation of the Learning City Program is the development and demonstration of a capacity-building process for establishing a restructured school organization that strengthens, mobilizes, and redeploys school, family, and community resources to implement and institutionalize a coordinated, inclusive system of education and related service delivery. The focus is on breaking down artificial barriers within the school and across agencies that provide educational and related services for children and families.

Key Features

The specific features incorporated in the Learning City design are highly influenced by over two decades of research and widespread field-based implementation of innovative school programs,

including the Adaptive Learning Environments Model (Wang, 1993) and the School Development Program (Comer, 1985). Building on the research base on fostering educational resilience of children and youth living in circumstances with high concentrations of multiple, co-occurring risks, the Learning City Program forges connections among school, family, and community resources in coordinated ways to significantly improve the capacity for development and education of children and youths in inner cities America (Rigsby, Reynolds, & Wang, 1995; Wang, 1995; Wang & Gordon, 1994).

A key design focus of the Learning City is a coordinated approach to service delivery that involves a restructuring of school, family, and community resources, a revisioning of staff roles, and putting in place a shared responsibility and collaborative teams approach that includes regular and special education teachers and "specialist" professionals such as school psychologists, speech pathologists, and others; a wide variety of service providers; families; and the community.

The implementation of the Learning City Program is supported by a delivery system that includes the following key components.

- A site-specific implementation plan that takes into account the school's program improvement needs, the learning characteristics and needs of the students, staff expertise and staffing patterns, curricular standards and assessment, and other implementation-related concerns.
- A schoolwide organizational structure that supports a teaming process involving regular and specialist teachers in the planning and delivery of instruction in regular classroom settings.
- A data-based staff development program that provides ongoing training and technical assistance tailored to the needs of the individual staff and program implementation requirements.

- An instructional-learning management system that focuses on the development of student self-responsibility for behavior and learning progress.
- An integrated assessment-instruction process that provides an individualized learning plan for each student that utilizes multiple approaches, including whole-class and small-group instruction as well as one-on-one tutoring, based on an ongoing analysis of student needs, resources, and expediency.
- A family and community involvement plan to enhance communication between the school and families and to forge a shared responsibility partnership and community connections to achieve schooling success of every student.
- A school-linked comprehensive, coordinated health and human services delivery program that focuses on the wellness and learning success of each student.

The Impact of the Learning City Program on Student Learning

The implementation of the Learning City Program seeks to impact on three major areas of student outcomes: (a) improved student achievement, particularly for those at the margins; (b) patterns of active learning and teaching that are consistent with the research base on effective practices; and (c) positive attitudes among students and the school staff toward their school, and most importantly, the expectation that every student has the capacity for educational success.

Findings from implementation studies in a variety of inner-city school settings to date show a general pattern of more positive attitudes among students in the Learning City Program when compared with non-program comparison schools. Students in the Learning City Program tend to perceive better and more constructive feedback from teachers about their work and behaviors, a higher level of aspiration for academic learning, better academic self-concept, and clearer

understandings of rules for behaviors and class/school operations. The data also show a positive pattern of changes in achievement scores in math and reading among the Learning City students, and that they outperformed comparison students in both subjects. Other noteworthy findings include the observation that families and the community became increasingly active in a wide range of school activities and in the decision-making process.

Many students have difficulty achieving schooling success and need better help than they are now receiving. If all students are to successfully complete a basic education through equal access to a common curriculum, the way in which schools respond to the diversity of student needs must undergo major conceptual and structural changes. Improvement efforts must take into consideration the learning context and require collaboration and coordination among professionals on a scale never previously attempted. The Learning City Program provides a delivery framework that mandates a coherent and coordinated approach with rooted connections with the family and the community in the service of the students.

Discussion

A variety of innovative programs have emerged across the country, emphasizing coherent and seamless child and family services that seek to improve education and life circumstances of children and youth placed at risk. These programs range from local, grassroots community efforts to state- and federal-level initiatives that seek to transform fragmented, inefficient systems of service delivery into a network of coordinated partnerships that cross programmatic and agency lines. However, despite unprecedented national attention and a myriad of programmatic initiatives at all levels, solid information is glaringly lacking on ways to bring what is known to work to bear in addressing the problem of inadequate learning among children and youth.

The work of the Learning City Program represents one attempt to find ways to reduce the co-occurring risks that surround many inner-city children and families. Our preliminary findings suggest the feasibility and potential for significant improvements.

Based on findings and experience of implementing the Learning City program across varied sites, we have identified several categories of imperatives to successful implementation of a comprehensive, coordinated approach to educational and related service delivery, such as the Learning City Program.

Planning for Implementation

- identify the primary purpose of the collaborative and its goals
- identify clientele (e.g., universal coverage, children and families in at-risk circumstances, only children enrolled in the school and their families, all children and families in the community served by the school)
- establish a "new" culture that evolves as problems and needs are identified in the local site—not a "top-down" mandate
- receive support from top levels of educational and agency hierarchies
- develop a "shared vision" that is facilitated by a lengthy planning period
- disallow any one agency or the school from dominating the collaborating partners
- include key stakeholders in planning

A Client-focused Approach

- resolve issues of client confidentiality, so that cooperating agencies and the school can share client and family data when necessary
- use of confidentiality waivers
- use of case management procedures
- demonstrate sensitivity to clients' cultural backgrounds

- focus on clients' multiple, co-occurring risks

Conditions That Promote Interprofessional Collaboration

- provide frequent opportunities for collaborators to interact
- clarify the evolving roles of teachers, school administrators, and members of the interdisciplinary team to reduce interprofessional conflicts
- prepare formal interagency agreements or educational policy trust agreements to help negotiate new roles among the interprofessional team
- establish common eligibility criteria among the collaborating agencies
- share the management of collaborative operations
- establish guidelines for shared data collection

Resource Allocation and Redeployment

- provide adequate space and resources for program operation
- provide technical assistance to collaborators
- identify funding sources that provide stability during the implementation phase and sufficient resources to foster real change

Conclusion

Few educational reforms have generated the same level of ground-swelling support as the comprehensive approach to coordinated educational and related services for children as a key school improvement agenda. The ultimate goal, one that the Learning City Program espouses, is to foster development and educational resilience and to promote the learning success of children and youth requiring greater-than-usual educational and related service supports. Of course, schools must remain the primary focus in efforts to find ways to improve this nation's capacity for education; for surely other efforts will come to naught if we fail to offer powerful forms of education in our schools. However, educational reforms of the 1990s that aim to address the

deepening problems faced by children and families in a variety of at-risk circumstances, must provide a broad-based coherent approach including family, school, and other community resources.

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